

Dealer Records :

Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi (1878-1955)

Title

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Description

Born in Ancona on 18 March 1878, Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi was the son of Camillo Contini and Countess Elena Bermudez Bonacossi. At the age of 19 he went to live in Milan where he met Erminia Vittoria Galli. They moved to Barcelona where they married. He worked in the commercial and legal sector of Chemical Works Co. Ltd. of Chicago and from 1904 he ran the Madrid office with Arrigo Petruzzi.

Until 1918 Contini-Bonacossi divided his time between Spain and Italy. While in Spain he began collecting stamps. He became a dealer and collector of works of art when, having settled in Rome that year, he was introduced by his son Augusto Alessandro to the art historian Roberto Longhi (who was to work for Contini-Bonacossi as his adviser until 1945).

In the 1920s Contini-Bonacossi settled in Tuscany where he purchased three rural estates: Capezzana, il Poggetto and Trefiano. From 1920 the shipper Achillito Chiesa, of Argentinian origin, became one of his most important clients. Chiesa established a collection of Italian and foreign paintings sold to him for the most part by Contini-Bonacossi. Chiesa's financial difficulties between 1925 and 1927 led to the sale of his collection at auctions in Milan and New York and the re-purchase by Contini-Bonacossi of some of his stock.

During business trips to the US, Contini-Bonacossi met Felix Warburg, Simon Guggenheim and Jules S. Bache. Bache purchased works from Contini-Bonacossi, but later Joseph Duveen persuaded him to sell these. In 1927 Contini-Bonacossi met Samuel H. Kress in Rome and began to sell him works of art. He continued to do so during Kress's annual trips to Italy which lasted until 1941 when both Italy and the US ceased to be neutral nations in the war.

In 1939 Contini-Bonacossi was made a Senator of the Kingdom of Italy. He was one of Mussolini's chief advisors on financial matters, according to a wartime intelligence report. The same report states that Contini-Bonacossi: "was made a Count by Benito Mussolini in exchange for giving his collection to the State, though he retained *usufruct* for life."

Contini-Bonacossi was introduced to Andreas Hofer (in charge of Göring's collection) by Gottlieb F. Reber who had known Contini-Bonacossi before the war. The association between Reber and Hofer also dated from the prewar years: Reber had been Hofer's employer between 1930 and 1934, when Hofer had accompanied him on trips to England, France, Holland and Italy. During the war (and prior to the Armistice of 1943) Reber became Hofer's principal agent in Italy acting for Göring's art interests. His main contact there was Contini-Bonacossi. Hofer paid Reber ten percent for all purchases from Contini-Bonacossi.

Hofer insisted under Allied interrogation that Contini-Bonacossi sold works exclusively to Göring and that Posse had been instructed not to approach Contini-Bonacossi. But after the war at least one painting (*Ritratto di donna*, Friulan-Venetian School, 16th century) was sold by Contini-Bonacossi to the *Sonderauftrag Linz*). Göring also purchased large quantities of furniture from the Italian dealer. The OSS Consolidated Interrogation Report No 2 includes a list of 49 art objects purchased from Contini-Bonacossi by Hofer on behalf of Göring with accompanying prices. Contini-Bonacossi purchased from Contini, a Rome art collector, a Masolino tempera which was then sold to Göring. Contini himself also sold Göring a School of Veronese oil in 1941 (exported using Göring's special train convoy to Germany and later recovered on 16 November 1948). Contini also

sold Contini-Bonacossi two Canalettos sold on to Göring in 1941.

In 1944 *Kunstschutz* head SS Col. Alexander Langsdorff removed from Tuscany to Campo Tures and San Leonardo the contents of five deposits of state-owned art and three private collections, including the Contini-Bonacossi collection. (The other private collections were the Finally and the Bourbon Parma).

Some of the works were restituted to Italy after the war, as a result of the efforts of Rodolfo Siviero's *Ufficio Recupero Opere d'Arte* of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs; many others were erroneously handed over by Stephen Munsing of the Allied Military Government to a representative of the Yugoslav government, [Ante Topic Mimara](#) .

Topic Mimara was a Yugoslav national with many pseudonyms, art collector, dealer, and forger, who travelled extensively in Europe between the wars, but spending most of his time in Munich and Berlin where he worked as a painter and restorer. In 1945 Mimara was arrested for currency speculation in the French zone of Allied Occupied Germany. In 1948 Mimara gave 148 paintings and sculptures to the Strossmayer Gallery in Zagreb.

In 1949 Mimara presented the Munich Collecting Point with a list of 166 art objects weighing twenty-five tons, which, he maintained, had been looted from Yugoslavia by the Nazis; these included fifty-six paintings. He was taken seriously; four shipments containing the 166 objects were handed over to Mimara between the end of May and the beginning of June 1949. Of these, only three actually belonged to Yugoslavia.

Of the paintings handed over to Topic Mimara many came from Italy (six of which were listed in a claim by the Italian authorities in 1954), four of these had been purchased by Göring from Count Contini-Bonacossi: the *Portrait of Queen Christina of Sweden* by Titian, *Madonna and Child with Donor* by Tintoretto, and a painting attributed to Carpaccio, *Holy Pilgrim and St Sebastian*.

Some of the erroneously restituted art objects from the Munich Collecting Point were taken to the National Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade. In 1973 Mimara gave most of his remaining collection to the Croatian Republic to be housed in the proposed "Mimara Museum".

To return to the main subject of this file, in 1950 the art collector Samuel Kress purchased from Contini-Bonacossi an oil painting (*Angeli*) which has been hanging in the National Gallery of Art in Washington since 1951. It was found to have been illegally exported in 1943.

In lists of art objects with gaps in their provenance the name Sestieri appears in conjunction with Contini-Bonacossi. Dott. Ettore Sestieri, was an art historian and dealer and the Director of the Galleria Barberini in Rome. He offered Hofer, among other objects, pictures from the Barberini Gallery (such as *Nativita*; by Antoniazio Romano). He also sold a painting to Hitler's *Sonderauftrag Linz*, recovered after the war from the Munich Collecting Point (on 16 November 1954). Sestieri worked in partnership with brothers Giulio and Luigi Grassi and Dott. Alessandro Morandotti, who introduced him to Andreas Hofer. Morandotti was an Austrian who had lived in Italy for many years, with a base in Rome and Venice. The Grassi brothers supplied Contini-Bonacossi with his furniture. They sold art objects to the Göring Collection through his buyers Angerer and Hofer. They may also have done business with Posse for Hitler's Linz museum collection.

After World War II Bernard Berenson acted as a character witness in favour of Contini-Bonacossi before the *Commissione d'Epurazione* (Commission for the Eradication of Fascists) which was investigating Contini-Bonacossi for his dealings with Nazi Germany, in particular with Hermann Göring and Hitler's agent Hans Posse. Contini-Bonacossi insisted to Allied interrogators after the war that he was not a dealer, but a connoisseur. His wife played an important part in his art business until her death soon after the war.

Contini-Bonacossi resumed his art business dealings with Kress with two sales, one in 1948 and one in 1950. He continued to sell the Kress Foundation several hundreds of works purchased in Italy

and abroad. Most of these works were later donated to the National Gallery of Art of Washington and to other museums such as: Tulsa, Oklahoma; Denver, Colorado; Honolulu, Hawaii; Raleigh, North Carolina; New Orleans; Ponce, Portorico.

He later supplied the collection of the Italian R. Gualino of Turin with works of art. He also sold many works to the collection of Vittorio Cini in Venice.

Contini-Bonacossi made donations to several Italian museums (including the *Museo Civico* of Bologna, *Castel Sant'Angelo* and *Palazzo Strozzi*), but his largest gift would have been the bequest of his entire collection: his will and that of his wife instructed that their art collection should not be broken up but donated to the Italian State (initially he had planned to leave it to the Vatican). For this promised gift Contini-Bonacossi was made a senator for life.

In 1965 his collection of 1,040 art objects was placed on display in the *Palazzo Capponi* of Florence by his heirs. Despite promises of bequeathing the entire collection, only 144 works were actually given to the Italian State by the *Villa of Pratello Orsini* in Florence. They are now part of the *Uffizi Museum* collection and are kept in the Meridiana Pavilion of the Boboli Gardens.

Many works from the collection were at that point sold to European and North American museums.

Source

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